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**Title:**

Chapter 1 - 'Perhaps this was the last of it all. He looked...'

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Perhaps this was the last of it all. He looked down the road to see if Mr. Bull's second lorry was coming up again too. No. He could see the road right down the dip and up the other side and along the top of the hill - where it changed from limestone to red sand and then to bitumen, but the other lorry did not come. So very probably this was the lot. He jiggled on the branch of the jacaranda tree to see if he could make any of the flowers fall, but they were still clinging tightly. The colour was good, though the flowers would have been better if they smelt as well as looked <sup>good</sup> nice. He had tried to paint them yesterday with the new paints he had got on Christmas Day labelled "With love from Father Xmas", but he had only made big blue daubs and dirtied the paint box and Grandma had laughed. ~~He wished she wouldn't.~~

"Hullo Mr. Bull."

"G'day Snow. What're yer doin' up there?"

"I climbed up to watch you. Is that all you're bringing today?"

"That's all I'm bringing at all. 'E's comin' 'imself this mornin'!"

"Who?"

"Mr. Fells."

"Who's Mr. Fells?"

"'E's going ter live 'ere."

"Oh." - of understanding.

"Ooh" said the boy on the back of the lorry. "Ooh," in saccharine tones. "Why don't you learn to speak proper yer little ciss! Oo too too beecootiful."

The child stared at him, flushed with fury. Mr. Bull got into the driver's cabin and started the lorry.

"Goodbai," said the boy, taking out his handkerchief to wave, "Goodbai little ciss. Cissy pissy, cissy pissy, cissy pissy, cissy

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little bloody pissy . . . " he sang as the lorry went off.

The child climbed down and started kicking the board round the edge of the flower bed. He'd show them. He drew himself up and stamped his foot with as much of a regal air as he could summon. The boy was before him, held by two stalwarts of the Thompson Guard.

"How dare you insult the King? Let him," with a gesture to his Captain of the Guard at his elbow, "be taken up the river and be kept on no food at all until he starves to death. Then cut him up."

"No, no, sire, I beg of you, mercy!"

"You should have thought of the consequences before you did the deed. No pardon for dirty cheeky people like you. Take him," a majestic sweep of the hand, "away." The boy was dragged away, screaming for his mother. "Good."

He glanced round furtively to see if any one had seen him, and observing with satisfaction that his grandmother had gone inside, skipped up the back to see if there were any almonds. They were still too green. Besides, Mrs. Schenkel was out the back hitting the door mat with a piece of board, and she had been nasty last year when she had seen him taking some, as the trees grew in her back yard against the fence. She was awful. There was the time she had asked Aunt Anne if she would like some grape fruit for marmalade and Aunt Anne had gone in and got some and then Mrs. Schenkel had said "That will be two and six, thank you." She was fat and bulgy and she smelt. Occasionally she came to Aunt Anne to have dresses made and she always hugged him if he was near and smothered his face in her bosom. He hated her. He always tried to get away when she came and would go into his cubby house made of old boxes in the back yard, where he used to sit and make up stories with himself as hero.

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He used to keep his costumes for dressing up in there - the best and favourite thing was a black mask, in which he could be a highwayman. He loved to look mysterious, and sometimes he would put it on and put on his overalls and tuck them into his socks and then the black rain-coat and the big straw hat Aunt Anne had bought him with a big ostrich plume he had taken from the bottom drawer of Grandma's chest. He would hide in the cypress hedge that ran down the side to the gate and peer out at passers-by, who would stare curiously, and sometimes, if they were women, giggle, half afraid.

He went across to the cubby house and climbed in. You had to be pretty lithe to get in round all the corners he had carefully constructed. It had rained that morning, and the wet deal of the packing cases gave off a sweet, sickly smell. Oh Blam! The books of Christmas card samples which formed the basis of his stock in trade when he set up shop were sopping, lying in a pool of water, with the red dye of the covers coming out and beginning to stain the wood in pink streaks. He scrambled out with them, bruising his shin on a corner in his haste. He ran inside banging the door, and grabbed up a towel from the basket of clean laundry.

"Now you don't, you little devil!"

"I shall," he cried, mopping quickly.

"Oh you little toad - give that to me! Now look what you've done! Gone and ruined a good clean towel that I only washed yesterday. If your Aunty wasn't here I'd give you what for, you little nuisance!"

"I'm not a toad, and I've got to have something to wipe it with."

"Well why couldn't you have took a duster, you stupid little thing?"

"John, what are you doing?" It was Aunt Anne, calling from the sewing room.

"Nothing."

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